Camp Stories

by Great Aunt Penny

During the summer of 2009, 12-year old Charlene Kaiya Blackledge was sent 1,400 miles away from home to attend a Jewish Summer Camp in Washington State. It was expensive, but Tricia and David were able to obtain a grant for half the costs. Family members were asked to mail some letters to Charlene to help stave off homesickness. Here are letters from GAP.

June 17, 2009

Dear Charlene,

Today is the day you start camp, as your DA emailed me earlier. I imagine it was quite exciting traveling by yourself from Albuquerque, New Mexico, all the way to Ocean Park, Washington. You're becoming a first-class adventurer.

I have another story/adventure to share with you from my camping days. As I wrote before, Patsy/Patti and 1 went to Camp Kahlert Girl Scout camp in Maryland, between the ages of 10-12. One summer I got stung by a bee on the foot. Being semi-allergic to bees, my foot swelled up to a gargantuan size. The skin of my foot was stretched so tightly that it looked shiny with ripple ridges and it was itchy-itchy-itchy. The camp nurse said it looked like at least 3 bees stung me.

I had to stay at the nurse's cabin where I lay on a cot in the screened-in porch all day with my foot raised. This was supposed to help the swelling go down, but I hated missing all the fun camper activities. Luckily, the nurse's outhouse was nearby, so it was convenient hopping over to it. I got to use crutches, too. So instead of having to share a many-seated outhouse with the other campers, I suddenly had a practically private outhouse nearby. The outhouse was a "two seater" and had a wooden partition between the two "seats." There was a space under the partition of about 2 feet so you couldn't see another person, but you could talk to her.

One afternoon I hopped over to the nurse's outhouse, entered its pungent darkness and sat down. As my eyes adjusted to less light, I felt a presence and looked down. Or did I hear a rattle? There, under the partition coiled into a mounded heap was the biggest snake I'd ever seen. It rested with its patterned colored knots of brown, gold and white mere inches from my swollen foot. We were both aware of the other.

I flew out of there into the bright afternoon sunshine so fast, yelling at the top of my lungs, "SNAKE, SNAKE, SNAKE!" Since this was the middle of camp rest hour and everyone was supposed to be quiet, my voice carried well. People came running. Thank goodness. I thought no one would believe me. After all, how did a snake make it into the outhouse in the first place? Some brave counselors hauled out the snake using sticks and literally beat the snake to death. I still see it lying in the dust, a lifeless stretched out form.

I'm pretty sure you have no snakes at your camp since snakes like to be warm, not cold and the state of Washington is cold, dank and rainy most of the time. The summers are the best time to be there. As you know, Aunt Patti lives in Kalama, Washington, which is near to Portland, Oregon. I don't know where Ocean Park, WA is in relation to Kalama.

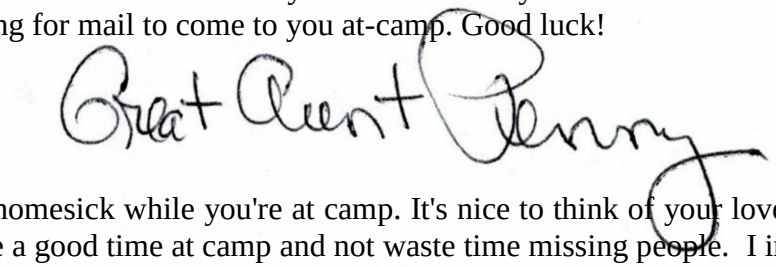
In my next letter, I'll tell you about another camp which Patsy/Pasty/Patti and I attended between ages 13 and 17.

One reason I remember details from long ago is because when I was about your age (actually age 14), I started keeping a diary on a regular basis. I used "five-year" diaries which means you have only a few lines to write each day. Rarely missing a day, I recorded this and that for the next ten years. Then I saved all the diaries thinking that one day my children would want to read them. The diaries are still in my garage here in California today. No one has read them. No one wants to read them because they are all too busy living their own lives and having their own adventures. I don't blame them.

I know you're an artist since DA/Mike emailed a painting you had done some time ago. It showed a lot of talent and that you had taken art lessons. How superb to be able to communicate in that form. I've decided to look into cartooning so I can make cards to send to friends instead of buying them. I have several books on cartooning. I thought the name, SHAKEY HAND, would be appropriate on the back of the card since I'm now an "older" person. I like the idea of scribbles and line drawings which show just a little and the rest is left to the receiver's imagination.

I'll close for now, but not before I leave you with a Shakey Hand scribble. It's supposed to be you, patiently waiting for mail to come to you at-camp. Good luck!

Love, GAP



P.S. Try not to be homesick while you're at camp. It's nice to think of your loved ones, but they all want you to have a good time at camp and not waste time missing people. I imagine you have a cell phone to call your Mom or Dad or Ian any time. If not, write like crazy and enjoy all the camp activities and make lots of friends. You're having a super-duper summer.

June 18, 2009

Dear Camper Charlene,

I was just deleting old emails and I came across one where DA/Mike says that you're flying out to camp in Washington State on June 18 which is today. I thought it was June 17. Also, two friends, both named "Celia" (or Cecelia) are going with you and they've been to the camp before. This is nice to have friends along. Remember, I always had my twin, Patti, with me at camp except my last experience as a counselor after my first year of college. Anyway, I wonder how you keep your Celia friends straight. I picture both of their heads twirling around when you call their name(s). Maybe you call one of them #1 and the other, #2.

Of course that probably wouldn't work very well because everyone wants to be #1. In fact, your great granddad, Allan Douglas Blackledge (dad of Barbara, Patti, Penny, Mike and Pete) used to do that with his sons, Mike and Pete. Mike was born first, so Daddy often referred to him as "my number one son". This made Pete the "number two son." Hmmmmm. How do you think that made Pete feel?

For some reason Daddy didn't "number" his girls. Maybe girls just weren't worth numbering. Horrors. When I grew up and got married and had two sons of my own (your cousins once removed: Andy and Nick), my husband Fred and I agreed that NO ONE would be number anything. It worked out very well. I hope both our sons consider themselves as #1.

You've probably heard of George Foreman, a famous boxer of yesteryear. Believe it or not, George named ALL of his SIX sons, "George." This is true. Compared to that, having two Celia's for friends probably isn't too much of a hassle after all.

I loved going to camp so much every summer that during the summer after my freshman year in college (age 18), I decided to get a job as a camp counselor for six weeks. The camp was Camp Mystic and located in Hunt, Texas. Our family was then living in Houston, Texas because our dad had retired from the Navy and was then working for Cameron Iron Works as a vice president. I went to high school and college in Houston.

My dad was very gregarious and did a lot of PR (public relations) work for Cameron. I think both Mike/DA and Pete turned out to be gregarious, too. Anyway, I had cute campers in my cabin at Camp Mystic. The oddest thing these 10-year-olds did was to write home and ask to be sent pickles. Everyone soon got jars of pickles in the mail and they began having contests in the cabin during rest hour as to who could drink the most pickle juice. Can you imagine the UGHS, puckering and face squinching?

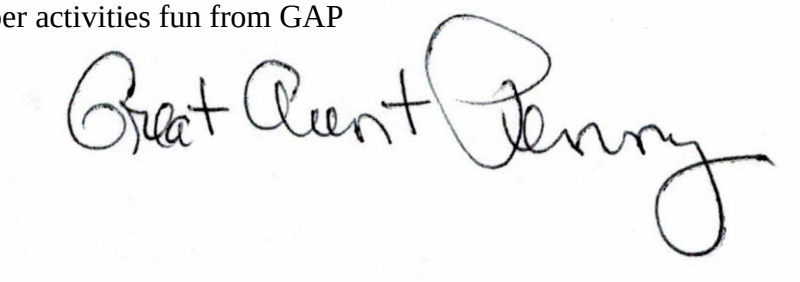
I was a swimming instructor at Camp Mystic. The other swim instructors were tough cookies, to say the least. Almost on a daily basis, one counselor or another would find a snake in the swimmers' water, grab it by the tail, toss it onto the bank, pick it up again by the tail, and crack it over her head like a whip until the snake was dead of a broken spine.

These same waterfront counselors told the campers, "Don't worry about the snakes in the

swimming area. They're water moccasins, and a water moccasin never bites unless its head is above water so you can see it coming. Just move." Hey, I actually believed this information and to quell any fears, decided to not worry unless I saw a snake's head raised and swimming my direction. Never happened. Months later, I researched the subject at the library when I got home and discovered that the claim about snakes biting only above water was a big, fat lie.

At the end of that six weeks as a counselor at Camp Mystic, I had earned a total of $50 (as well as my room and board). Back home in Houston, I took the entire $50 and splurged on a pink leather jacket. It was a perfect fit, light pink in color, well made with silky lining. I loved that jacket and wore it all over the campus at Rice where I went to college. I even took it along when I got married to Fred at 22. That jacket lasted many years and probably rates as my lifelong favorite piece of attire.

Next time I'm going to concentrate my letter on the camper's favorite subject: FOOD. Until then, Hugs and lots of camper activities fun from GAP

Love, 

June 24, 2009

Hi, Charlene,

Da just visited us here in sunny southern California, along with Bonnie, and last night we treated them to dinner at the Long Beach Yacht Club, along with Uncle Pete and Laura. Cousin Nick couldn't come since he had to attend his Administration class (to become a future administrator in a high school) last night from 5-8 p.m.

We had everyone sit at the big round table in the corner with the large windows. It's a great view of the sailboats, rowing skiffs and an occasional surfboard skimming by. I sat across from (Great Uncle) Fred and between my brothers, Mike/DA and Pete. The conversation was full blast with lots of laughing. It was lots of fun to hear the repartee between Mike and Pete. They are extra funny together. We gobbled up fish and/or steak and yummy chocolately desserts. DA had someone take our picture.

Speaking of desserts, I must relate the camp story of Aunt Patsy and the five banana splits. It took place one early summer evening at Camp Stonycroft in Michigan. After dinner, we junior counselors hiked along the dirt road into the tiny town of Shelby where a small, rickety store sold sodas and ice cream. It had red and white checkered curtains on the windows and indoor picnic tables plus one juke box.

Inside, a sign hung behind the counter. The message said in chalk:, "**BANANA SPLIT CHAMPION: Larry White, 4 ½ banana splits at one sitting**." Patsy said, "Oh, I could beat that record any day." Pudgy challenged her that she couldn't. After all, she was just a skinny 14 year old girl. We kids all started betting and wondered who was going to pay for the splits.

Pudgy promised he'd pay but only if Patsy actually beat the posted record.

The background to this story is that Patsy and Penny never got to eat sweets at home. Mother never baked and there would be no cookies, chips, cakes, candy in the house. My biggest dream was that I would get "lost" overnight in a 5 and 10 cent store because Mother would somehow forget me until the next morning and I'd be locked in for the night. I would spend that delightful night sampling all the candies in the store, non-stop.

So when Patsy said she wanted to challenge the banana-split record, I thought she could do it from a desire standpoint. I just wasn't sure that her stomach could hold it all. Were her eyes bigger than her stomach? Patsy was interested in both: the thought of non-stop ice cream plus the glory of her name on the chalkboard as the new champion. With anticipation she sat at the chrome counter. They brought out the first banana split. It was a doozie: an entire banana split in half, topped with 3 scoops of ice cream (vanilla, chocolate, strawberry), chocolate sauce, nuts, whipped cream and a cherry on the top.

Patsy gobbled her mouthwatering treat down in no time and said, "Next, please". There it came, another banana split beauty. After eating most of it, her cheeks looked full and she slowed down her bitefuls just a tad. #2 took a little longer to finish.

Mostly full, but also still full of fight/greed, Patsy said, "Ready for #3." It arrived, but some-how this one didn't look so yummy [although it was identical to the other two]. Halfway through the third split, Patsy began shivering and said, "I'm cold. Can someone cover me with jackets?" The rest of us took off jackets and sweaters and soon her hunkered shoulders were covered with warmth.

#4 was hard. Really tough. Patsy was already full and uncomfortable. The ice cream was tasteless cold. Whipped cream oozed out of her lips. Her eyes were squeezed shut in stuffing agony. The rest of us shouted encouragement, but cringed to see her shove down each blah bite. She somehow managed but the fight seemed to go out of her at that point.

Here came #5. UGH. It looked bigger than all the rest. Patsy knew she had to eat it all because the current champion had eaten 4 ½. She must have had a surge of willpower since the first half of the banana split actually went down OK, but the last half was not a pretty sight: groans and moans. One thing about this contest: you cannot cheat eating banana splits. Ice cream does not fit into pockets nor hide down on the floor. While stuffing in the last several icy bites, Patsy almost choked. She gasped, "Take off the jackets!" She knew what was coming. We all grabbed our jackets and stepped back.

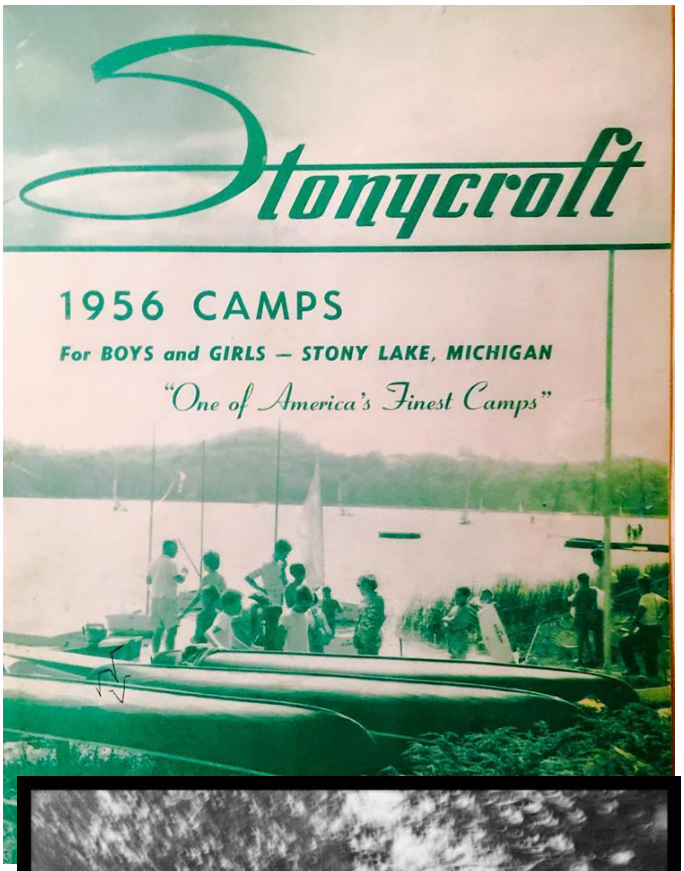
Patsy raced to push open the store screen door, stumbled out into the darkness and then heaved. She lost a lot of ice cream that night, but Pudgy lost a lot of money. After that, she felt a little better and went back inside to be sure they put:

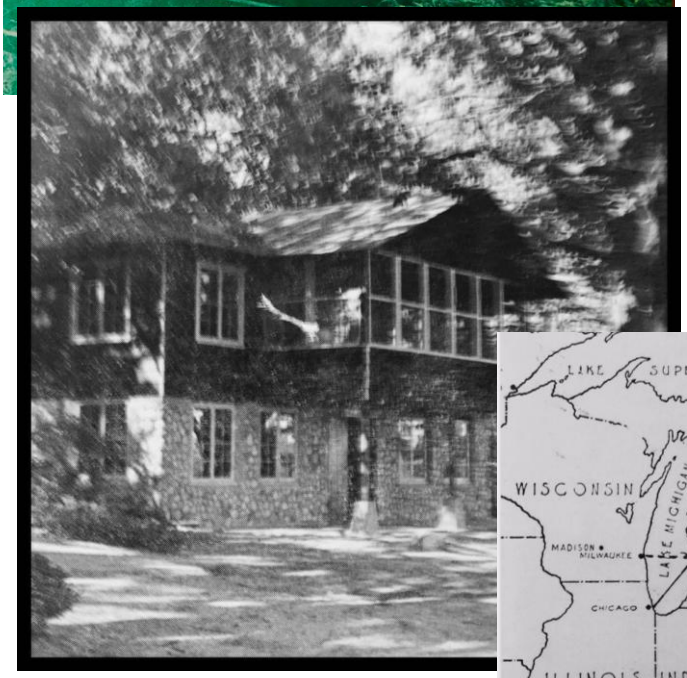
PATSY BLACKLEDGE, 5 banana splits

on the board as the new champion. Who knows - that record may still stand.

Banana split hugs from GAP, Great Aunt Penny

P.S. While Da was visiting here recently, he brought up photos onto my computer which showed your recent birthday party. So now I know you're officially twelve, not thirteen. That means I'm 61 years ahead of you in Life. Yipes. I remember back to 12. It was FUN.





Camp Stonycroft: a children and teen recreational summer camp on Stony Lake, Michigan from the 1940s to about 1962. Stonycroft was located between Muskegon and Ludington.

Camp motto:
"KEEP YOUR FACE TOWARD THE SUN, AND YOUR SHADOWS WILL FALL BEHIND YOU".

There were many activities from which to choose swimming, riflery, archery, handicrafts, ping-pong, tether ball, basketball, etc.

"When I became experienced at canoeing, I would sign up and take a canoe to practice gunneling, capsizing, and righting"

Campers had the opportunity to hike to Lake Michigan, a few miles west.

First part of the 18 mile hike (total miles) to Little Sable Point Lighthouse. After a picnic lunch, campers returned to camp, walking again along the shores of Lake Michigan.

"I can remember riding back from the lighthouse in the van, and everyone was singing "Blue Moon" by the Marcels."

Alumni will remember the organization of the camp. The girl's camp on top of the hill, the boy's camp at the bottom, the Dining Hall and Lodge, both camp activity centers. The Lodge was the heart of camp where church services, movies, dances, and entertainment were presented.

The rising bugle, played from a scratchy record in the lodge, was always too early as was cabin inspection. There were many morning activities available.